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Gorbachev May Press Drive to Split U.S., Allies

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WASHINGTON—The selection of suave and vigorous Mikhail S. Gorbachev as the new Soviet chief after years of aging and feeble leadership may strengthen Moscow's efforts to drive a wedge between the United States and its allies but is not likely to result in much substantive change in Soviet policy, U.S. experts said Monday.

These specialists expect Gorbachev to adopt a conciliatory line toward Western Europe—where he made inroads last December with a successful trip to Britain—and a harsh tone toward the United States.

"If one faces an alliance, one should try to split it," said Walter Laqueur, a senior staff member of both the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University and the Institute of Contemporary History in London.

Little Immediate Impact

Beyond atmospherics, the leadership change is not expected to have much immediate impact on Soviet foreign policy, which was the product of group decisions within the ruling Politburo throughout the tenure of President Konstantin U. Chernenko, who died Sunday.

U.S. experts believe Gorbachev will devote the next year or so to the critical task of solidifying his own position atop the Soviet hierarchy before turning his attention to major changes in either foreign or domestic policy.

"The Soviets are becoming sensitive to the fact that all over the world the Soviet Union is perceived as a power in decline," said Arnold Horelick, director of the

Rand/UCLA Center for the Study of Soviet International Behavior. "The physical appearance of the leader seemed to reinforce this mood. Politically, it was extremely damaging both at home and abroad. I think Gorbachev will be very sensitive to that and will try to give the impression that the Soviet Union is on the move.

"Everyone is waiting for someone to appear on the Soviet side in whom you can invest some illusions," Horelick said, explaining that the Soviet people want a vigorous leader and the West wants a Soviet liberal.

Helmut Sonnenfeldt, an expert on the Soviet Union, formerly with the State Department and now on the staff of the Brookings Institution in Washington, said the Soviet Union has tried for years to appeal to Western Europeans to abandon the alliance with Washington.

'A Live, Breathing Leader'

"They have an advantage now that they have a live, breathing leader who can deal with European leaders," Sonnenfeldt said. "The important party in the West is the United States. A lot of this stuff with the Western Europeans is designed to put pressure on this country."

George Carver, a former CIA official now at Georgetown University, said Gorbachev at 54 is obviously younger and healthier than the 70-year-olds who have been running the Soviet Union since the declining years of President Leonid I. Brezhnev, who died in 1982. However, he said the new leader is not very different from his predecessors in matters of policy.

"Moving out of the geriatric ward is good for them, but whether it is good for us remains to be seen," Carver said. "You don't survive the winnowing-out process in the Politburo unless you are cut from the same cloth as your fellow members. (George) McGovern and Jimmy Carters do not rise to the top in the Soviet Union."

When Yuri V. Andropov succeeded Brezhnev in 1982, he was

described in a barrage of propaganda as a closet liberal who sometimes listened to American jazz. But Andropov, who died in 1984, never lived up to the image. U.S. specialists believe that Gorbachev may be similarly perceived—but that he, too, is unlikely to fit the image.

Gorbachev visited London in December, charming the usually skeptical British with well-tailored suits, a moderate manner and a stylish wife.

No Hint of Own Views

Very little is known of Gorbachev's personal views. His speeches have all reflected established Soviet policy without giving as much as a hint of his own ideas.

"To have gotten as far as he has, Gorbachev has to have been good at camouflage and tactical maneuver," said Thane Gustafson, director of the Soviet studies program at Georgetown's Center for Strategic and International Studies.

His colleague Angela E. Stent added: "We know even less of his views on foreign policy than we know of his views on domestic policy. It is very dangerous to think that Gorbachev will be any more 'liberal' or 'flexible' (than his predecessors) on foreign relations."

Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser in the Carter Administration, noted that Gorbachev's patrons in the Kremlin were Andropov, who was the chief of the KGB secret police before becoming president, and Mikhail A. Suslov, for years the Kremlin's watchdog of ideological purity.

"When the Soviet KGB chief sees something promising in a young man, you have to ask yourself, 'What is it?'" Brzezinski said. "One has to look at what the man stands for, what his career was. In that respect, I expect a much more skillful, energetic—but in many respects, more dangerous—sort of leader."

Former Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., said the change probably will not have much impact on the U.S.-Soviet arms control talks opening today in Geneva.